

Microcosm



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Microcosm

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Staff

Marian Brown

Seth Case

Steven Covington

Brandon Grady

Brian Hairston

Lindsey Mills

Robyn Sartin

Amber Sbravati

Bridge Nail (Dustin Sutton)

Faculty Advisors

Glenda Silverii

David E. Campbell

Cover Design

Sheila Stewart

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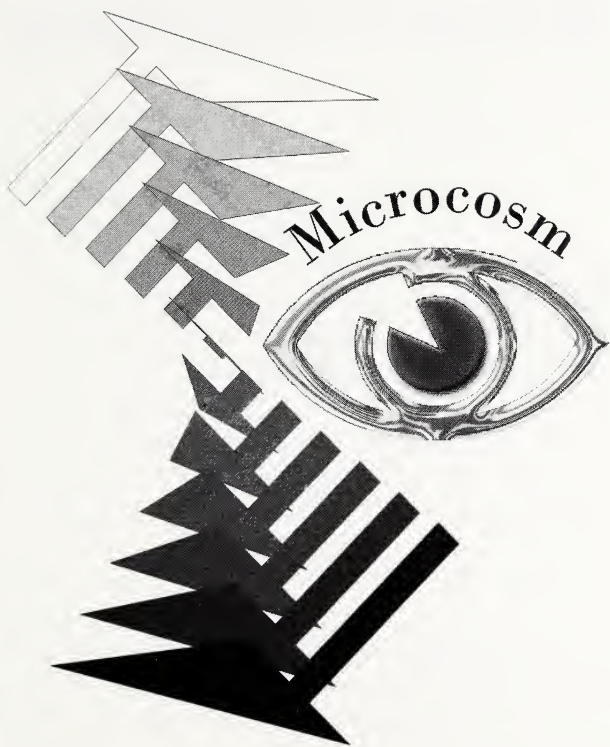
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Illustrator: Sheila Stewart

Short Stories

I Am Incorporeal

By Garrett Ashley

There is nothing left for me, O Lord of Lords, but because you will listen, I shall tell you the tale of my sorrow, of the mistake I made, and how my soul will forever pay for that mistake.

I tried to listen in as the imaginary cry of my wife faded away and the police units' radios buzzed and went in and out of signal. It was getting dark; the flashing lights of the cruisers all over the area shined as brightly as the sun, drawing my eyes to a close and tendering my thoughts to pulp matter.

It had been a long evening; I had fought long and hard with my dear wife, O sweet Monique, now so tender and innocent, so bright and beautiful, so moving, yet so cold. It was a fight that would separate us for what would seem an eternity. It was a fight that would last until the day my soul moved on from this cursed world, and be with her in the after, where I would still love her forever.

What I had experienced after our heated argument was no more than a simple car crash. Alone I was, as I wanted to be, after such an outrageous but immature quarrel, on the roads just on the outskirts of the land surrounding my home headed into the town. The slick ice on the pavement had done me in...set me apart from the rest of the world to come. I was alone, but as I said, I could hear my wife's voice growing in the dark, and just as it grew, it would fade away. Unlike what they say about death, though, I felt or saw no memories of old. Only the things I had long regretted. Then, they haunted me just as I haunt this world.

I felt something moving over me. The dark shroud of nothingness stepped over my face, ignored by all the people around, and went west into the woods where it would stay.

Something inside me wanted to see what the thing was. And as I tried to pick myself up, my bones cracked and twanged, my eyes bulged, and my heart seemed to stop completely. I was out of my body. I turned downward and saw the mutilated face covered in blood. It wasn't as shocking as I assumed it would be. For some reason, I wasn't afraid.

The sounds of chatting, wind, and the ambience of the winter forest ended. All was silent. Everything. How could that have been? I looked back around to the being dressed in black; I knew who it was. Far behind in the winter wood, there was a beige horse with

shining red eyes. It looked at me once, but it did not hold my breath in grasp as the next figure of woe would have. The Angel of Death was frightening. He looked at me with the most solemn, coldest eyes I had ever seen.

I couldn't go yet. I looked back to the image of my wife, propped against a police cruiser's hood with a gaping smile, and for a while, I called for her. There was no answer. "Monique!" I cried. By this point, I already knew that she wasn't actually there. "Monique!" Nothing. Not a single tear drop shed for the sound of my voice. I guess death has its own consequences. It makes you see things you don't want to see.

The cold hands of Death touched my shoulders and beckoned me to follow. I couldn't take my eyes off the image of Monique. She was too beautiful for that, but I had to let go. I looked back to the angel in black, and nodded my head. I couldn't cry, for some reason. I didn't feel like crying. The moment meant nothing to me, not anymore.

"Where will you take me?" I asked Death.

The angel turned back to the forest in the direction of its pale horse. It looked onward, and then back to me, but spoke no words.

"What's there?" I asked. "Is there something beyond the trees and snow?"

The flashing lights of the police units faded away. A deep, bright fog covered them, and the life that was once a normal world seemed to disappear. Now, it was only him and me...Death and me. "Where are you taking me?" I asked again.

No answer. I wondered if he had even listened. I knew it must be frustrating for a guy to be questioned constantly with concerns of death and the after. After all, we humans have our many examples that follow Satan, or nothing at all. I bet those are hard to deal with. I can't blame him for not wanting to talk.

So I followed without question. Into the mystic void of fog, shadow, and snow, we went until the pale horse faded away, and only the trees still existed. Time still seemed to play no part in this existence...I wondered where I was. It wasn't home. It wasn't life. But Death reassured me; I was still on earth; I was still there in the world of what I would have called the living.

And above me, past the tree limbs and clouds so high in the sky, there was a pit of light that grew out of space, and in this light, there came a path so clear and so bright that it blinded my soul's eyes and purged me into a torment I had never felt in life.

"What's this?" I cried. There was a loud burst of thunder then, and everywhere that Death walked there was darkness. I could only look into the light. There was nothing more for me behind...there was nothing more for offer.

But I looked at Death. He seemed so confused by the moment; almost as if he was lost. Maybe the light scorched his pale but unseen flesh. Maybe he was afraid. He no longer paid any mind to my thoughts, nor did he give attention to my actions.

I didn't want to look toward the light anymore. For years and years I had heard about it. The final path. The final steps. The goal in life, but where was I, and what did I want, exactly? I wasn't compelled to follow that path. My mind spun in circles as I thought to make a choice. Just what if I turned back?

I'd see nothing more than darkness. Even Death had faded away. He had done his part. I had a feeling he'd be no more harm now that I was on the set path. I turned back and looked down to the earth for something that still possibly held the light of day.

Nothing but my memories; nothing more than the days past. What I saw before my eyes was the present! Or was it the future? It didn't make much of a difference, anyway. Time seemed to have no way with me now. My wife, drenched in tears from cheek to neck, sat quiet and alone on our old couch by the fire. Our young dog, Cassie, was there, but she was just as quiet, and just as asleep, quite unusual for the little girl.

I wondered how far into the future this really was. No! It couldn't have been so. Could I have gone back? Was it my purpose in life to return to her? What would happen to my soul? What would happen to my thoughts? I'd seen all the ghost specials on TBS. That stuff scared me. Is that what I was meant to be?

Yes. I leapt at the opportunity. I embraced it just as well as my death.

The light behind faded. It was no more. I fell next to the fire where my wife had been. Her body was exhausted from all the tears well spent; she rested in an obscure manner, depressed, torn to pieces, with her head back on the pillow, arms bent over her chest, with one leg hanging off the couch.

"Monique?" I muttered.

There was no answer.

"Monique? Can you hear me?"

Still, no answer.

I went in to touch her naked leg, but something kept me from

doing so right away. It wasn't her beauty. I wasn't afraid of the living. I just didn't want to disturb her. She looked so peaceful there, with Cassie at her side. The dog stirred under her arms and became visible to me.

She looked dead into my eyes and licked her lips. There came a sharp growl from deep within her throat, but then she fell back into a sleep. Monique shifted but didn't turn enough to throw Cassie into yet another conscious anger.

It all amazed me. Could she really see me? Smell me? Did she still hate me? I stood up on my ghostly feet (I was still clothed in the same old stuff I had died in) and looked down upon them with a cold frown. I missed them...even though I was in the same room as they. I imagined myself living here as a spirit.

Spirit, ghost, apparition, incorporeal entity of the past, whatever, I don't care what I'm called. I'm here because I chose to be here. That's what I thought. I knew what I had done. I knew I had made a mistake.

And imagining the future was such a fright. What if my wife never suspects a thing? Would I be cursed to haunt the grounds until...until...well, that's a tough one. I'd be forced to haunt those grounds, all the while watching my wife and her life pass by with the blink of an eye. I wanted to go back in time and change my mind about the path of light.

I missed my opportunity. It was pretty stubborn for someone who believes in Heaven...someone who believed in You, my Lord, my only audience in this tale of woe. I felt like such a fool. But then again, I felt like I had been scammed. What a pathetic deal; now what should I believe?

Should I only believe that my wife still loves me? That was the only thing that seemed to matter at the time. Her bare leg twisted and turned in the presence of my cold, ghostly soul. I knew I was to blame for the chilling air. The room had become so cold...I could tell just by watching her shiver...by the tenseness of the muscles in her calves and neck, and how she hid her face under the confines of the maroon cushion every now and then for warmth.

I took a blanket from a chair near the corner of the room and covered her with it. She pulled at the cotton material, smelled it, and no longer stirred in her sleep. Everything seemed to be so warm, thereafter.

But her leg was still hanging off the couch. It looked so uneasy there. As I went in to lift it onto the couch, something stopped me

again. Something strange...like an unseen force. Like the hands of another spirit.

"Am I not supposed to feel sympathy for my wife?" I asked aloud. The room seemed to shake, just as well as little Cassie beneath the covers with Monique. I forced my hand to finally touch her leg and lift it up onto the couch. The heat of living, breathing flesh was like a flame. I didn't grit my teeth or make a sound...but instead went away from her, afraid that I may have done more harm than good.

But even then she seemed to sleep so soundly.

God, I loved her so much.



Illustrator: Nate Lias

The Night He Left Home

by Bridge Nail (Dustin Sutton)

Although it wasn't his Christian name, in the last years I saw him, he would only respond to "Michael." Jacob Randall Abbott had been a patient of mine for thirteen years when he escaped from the minimum security ward of Whitfield. They should have listened, if not to me, then to the danger his silence screamed.

Jacob was only eight when we had our first session, and I must admit that even I saw no real threat in him. Sure, he met all the credentials: broken home, absent father, medicated but deranged mother, victim to nearly all forms of abuse, and although seemingly irrelevant, born Halloween night. Yet, he seemed so well-adjusted. He had an IQ of 147, an extensive vocabulary, and was already engaged in frequent abstract thought. Perhaps, I should have seen everything coming.

Most children idolize fictional characters like Spiderman or other superheroes; Jacob preferred Freddy Krueger, Leatherface, but most of all Michael Myers. He said that he not only loved the masked killer's subtlety but admired his persistence as well. All the signs were there, but I saw Jacob living in a fantasy he constructed in order to escape his harsh environment--a fantasy where he couldn't be harmed. To eliminate this symptom, I started at the source. It wasn't easy, but eventually I convinced him that it was in Jacob's best interest to be in-patient, as no change had occurred in four years.

Within months, I observed positive changes. He still lived a fantasy, but now it was Star Trek with Captain Kirk as his new role model. I can't say I was a fan of that particular show, but I certainly preferred it over the fictional killers he had previously respected. What bothered me was that neither parent showed interest in the change, and when I requested family counseling, they both declined. By the time Jacob was prepared to re-enter society, they were gone.

You must understand; this boy had been a constant in my life for almost five years, so naturally I had begun to care for him. My wife, Audrey, and I had tried to create our own family many times but to no avail, and when she met him, she was delighted that we took him in for a while. They connected immediately; when Audrey introduced herself, Jacob's eyes lit with joy, and he threw his arms around her. A teardrop trickling into the crevice of her smile was priceless to behold.

Before we knew it, Jacob was the son we never had. Sometimes, Audrey and I would laugh at the possibility that we were spoiling him with affection and gifts. His two prized possessions were two 1975 Captain Kirk masks that once belonged to Audrey's deceased brother, which were now mounted inside a glass display case. His room was a shrine paying homage to Captain James Kirk of the starship Enterprise. Oddly enough, he never cared to go to any Star Trek conventions when Audrey and I offered to take him, even when William Shatner was scheduled for an appearance. I considered that it was a good thing; Star Trek was a hobby as opposed to an obsession.

At school, Jacob pretty much kept to himself. He was never rude, but I often got the impression that everyone, teachers included, felt intimidated by Jacob. Before long, I was contacted by the counselor of his high school. She thought that early graduation would be a prudent action for Jacob, commenting on his acceleration past fellow students. Audrey and I agreed, and by the age of sixteen Jacob was a high school graduate.

Jacob was in no rush to begin college. He felt that making his own money would provide him with a sense of independence, so he took a job as an auto-detailer, employed by a friend of mine at my request. Jacob took this very seriously. He all but demanded that Audrey and I get him the proper clothes and materials necessary for the job. Audrey returned with Jacob from Jackson one Friday night with their arms loaded: two pairs of Dickies coveralls, two pairs of Dexter work-boots, a painting mask, a tape measure, safety goggles, and a tool-belt among other things. Jacob stepped into his new job as though he'd been at it his whole life. With his pronounced height for his age, he never looked out of place. When he had his hair in a ponytail, everyone knew he was deep in thought about how to approach the next task. Audrey and I were overwhelmed with pride and enthusiasm for Jacob.

Sitting in my office one afternoon, I reflected upon how everything in our lives was as it should be. For over five years, Audrey, Jacob, and I had been living as a family. Then it happened. A call was patched through to my office—it was Jacob's mother. She informed me that she had moved to Georgia in order to seek more advanced mental therapy and desperately wanted to see Jacob. I filled her in on everything that had transpired since her departure and eventually agreed to inform Jacob of her plea.

Jacob's level of disinterest was both relieving and disturbing.

When I mentioned her request, I saw a flicker of something beneath his eyes I hadn't witnessed in years. I remember feeling concerned--almost afraid. But as quickly as this flicker appeared, it vanished.

Jacob merely shrugged his shoulders and said, "If she calls again, tell her I'll deal with her as soon as I'm ready. As far as I'm concerned, you and Audrey are my parents now."

I simply forgot my alarm at what had happened behind his eyes and felt only love. I pulled Jacob close and told him that my wife and I would be anything he wanted us to be for him as long as he wanted. When I told Audrey of his response, sobs of joy erupted from her in geyser-like proportions. The very next day she headed to our local Red Wings dealer and bought him the best pair of black Red Wing boots and brand new black insulated Carhartt coveralls.

"Jacob's a tall young man," she said, "he's already too tall for his Dickies, and they were supposed to fit anyone up to six foot, three inches. Plus, the Red Wings will help protect his feet better. He's our son now, and I want to enjoy these last few months we have with him before he leaves for college."

Jacob accepted the gifts with an eerie glee. The next day he returned from work with a male mannequin to display them on. He explained that he planned to only wear them on special occasions and didn't want the Carhartts to get wrinkled. It was as though he treasured these items as much as his Captain Kirk masks. Each day he would dust the boots off and straighten the coveralls as best that he could, especially since the mannequin was much shorter than he.

I remember vividly the last meal we ate together as a family. Jacob had received a full scholarship to the University of Mississippi, and we were all discussing the details. Over our meal of roast beef, mashed potatoes, and green beans, Audrey and I boasted at how wonderful our Jacob had grown up to be.

He'd remained silent for most of the meal until Audrey finally inquired, "Jacob, honey, is everything alright?"

"I'm just really going to miss the both of you," he said, "and I just wanted to let you know that I love you guys more than anything in this world."

"Sweetie, you're only going to college, it's not like you're being drafted or anything. I know it's too far to commute, but if you ever need anything, you know we're only a phone call away."

At this he finally smiled. We finished our meal and all decided to turn in early, for the following morning was to be a very busy one, indeed. We both took our turns congratulating Jacob for what

seemed the hundredth time, and then retired to our bedroom for a good night's sleep.

It was Audrey's panic that awoke me.

"He's gone!" she shouted from the hallway.

"No, he can't be gone," I told her in the calmest voice I could muster, "check by the river bed. He often goes there when he's anxious or depressed."

"I've already checked there, Timothy, I've checked everywhere. I'm telling you, he's gone! Come here, look."

She led me into Jacob's room, and the first thing I noticed was that his masks were gone. I thought all of his clothes and other possessions remained until I noticed that his Star Trek overnight bag was missing. We scrambled through his entire room in a state of panic then noticed that the mannequin was bare. "Special occasion." I remember wondering if this was what he meant. Eventually, we realized that all his coveralls and boots were absent as well.

As he had recently turned eighteen, reporting a runaway was not an option, and we couldn't file a Missing Person's report until Jacob was gone for twenty-four hours. When we were finally able to file the report, it seemed to do no good. Jacob was nowhere to be found.

The next few months were excruciating for my wife and me. It seemed only a moment ago that we were accepting Jacob into our home, and now he had left us. Audrey spent most of the following weeks in bed, too distraught to even move.

One night, nearing Jacob's nineteenth birthday, I found myself sitting on the floor in Jacob's room. I remember crying every time I glanced at his Captain Kirk posters. For days after, I watched his Star Trek episodes, just trying to make it feel like he was there. When I came upon the fourth disc, a shock hit me as I opened the case to find a movie titled *Halloween* inside. As it was, I had never actually seen the film. Sure, I'd heard of it: a guy in a white mask killing off teenagers in a suburban environment, but I never troubled myself with viewing it. I've never been a fan of that genre of pictures. But Jacob was hiding it, and I had to know why.

When the movie ended, I began to form a revelation. I opened the next case to find two discs called *Halloween: 25 Years of Terror* and immediately began watching. Everything became clear after watching this documentary of Michael Myers; I leapt from the floor and stared hard into Captain Kirk's face on the wall. The famous Myers mask really did look like William Shatner. Then, something caught

my attention out of the corner of my eye. On top of Jacob's trash can sat a sheet of paper with the words "THE PROPHECY HAS BEGUN" written upon it. I picked up the note and saw a green towel covered with white stains. Beneath it, I saw two cans of white spray-paint and a can of Audrey's hair spray sitting on what looked like fragments of hair. Instantly, I knew what was going on; it had been a ploy from the beginning. When I turned on the television, there were reports of three ghastly murders, one in Georgia and two in Louisiana.

Without even bothering to rouse Audrey, I phoned the police and told them my ideas. They thought I was merely suffering from a breakdown due to Jacob's disappearance, but I demanded to be connected to the Georgia and Louisiana State Police departments. I told them my concerns and dealt with their rationalizations, but in the end, I convinced them to keep alert because I knew Jacob could be dangerous.

Another week passed, then one night I noticed a fire in our front yard. It was Jacob. I yelled to let Audrey know that Jacob was back as I flung the door open to find out everything, anything. Audrey was right behind me in seconds, and together we anxiously, yet cautiously, approached Jacob. There he was, standing naked by the fire holding one of his masks, the mask.

"Jacob," Audrey began, her voice shaking.

At this, he tossed his mask onto the fire and let out a roar that sounded like a thousand demons screaming at once. That was the last sound anyone ever heard Jacob make. Within hours, he was back in the institution, and I was before a panel of doctors deciding the fate of Jacob Randall Abbott. Even though I knew it in my gut, there was no hard evidence to link him to the murder of both his parents, so he was placed in the minimum security ward despite my numerous warnings.

Two years passed, and there was still not a single sound. He never even acknowledged anyone until I finally spoke to him privately; no security, no other patients--nothing to distract my train of thought. Since he'd been institutionalized, I'd done extensive research on Michael Myers. I was now ready to confront him. I stared at him for quite some time until whispering, "I saw your movies. I know the truth about Star Trek, Captain Kirk, the masks, and your love for Audrey, simply because of her name. Audrey was his middle name, and you tricked us into obtaining the necessary means

for you to complete your destruction. I know what you did, Michael.” At the mention of the name, he cocked his head to the side and made eye contact for the first time since he’d returned. I found myself unable to stare back for very long. He frightened me. From that day forward, he would only respond when addressed as “Michael.”

Then, one day Jacob received visitors. He was led to the meeting room where three men and one woman awaited him. After the four gazed at him with disgust, one of the men finally spoke.

“We are the siblings you never met. Our parents had been married for almost eleven years when Dad met your mother. Now our mom and dad are gone, and we know you did it. Our father told us all about you, about how strange you were. He was wrong, you’re not strange, you’re psychotic; you’re sick!”

After the man spoke those words, the woman spat in his face, and the four of them left the premises. Jacob remained motionless—as though he never even knew they were there, but I could sense it behind his blank stare. He saw them, and he heard them loudly and clearly.

It was that night that a counselor’s assistant was found dead, and his car missing. I didn’t even have to wonder when I received the call; I knew it was Jacob. As I’d suspected, Jacob had escaped. Almost three years of gentle behavior, and now this. I raced to the office and grabbed his file, punching one of the panel doctors on my way out as a way of saying, “I told you so.”

I now realize that I’ve fallen prey to a self-fulfilling prophesy, a plot that Jacob choreographed from the start. Now I’m forced to assume the role of his “Dr. Loomis.” I will not rest until I find him, and when I do, I will end the nightmare once and for all. I know where he’s going and who he’s trying to get to. I will stop him at any cost, even if that means my life. He deceived us, and Audrey may never recover. I will find Jacob Randall Abbott. I’ll kill him and face the consequences, even if that means death; I cannot live with this guilt and shame any longer.

The Parents

By Steven Covington

I really love my fiancé a lot, so whenever she told me not to be late for lunch with her parents, I heeded her warning. We had been dating for six months before I decided to pop the question. Today was the day every man dreads, getting to meet her parents. She was excited and kept telling me how wonderful they were. One of my friends, who had already met them, told me how overbearing her mother was and how intimidating her father was. Her father was a Marine, so I was just thinking of all the ways he could break me in half if he didn't like me. I was sure he was going to tell me about how he could tear me into a million pieces if I ever hurt his daughter.

I told my boss I needed to take a long lunch. He didn't care. He never seemed to care about anything, which was why I was definitely sure our business was going bankrupt within the next year. I thought to myself about how I wished her dad was like my boss. I could get anything over on him if he was like this idiot. I looked down at my clock and noticed that our lunch was in ten minutes. I started sweating with horror. The place we were eating at was at least twenty minutes across town. I should not have been day-dreaming and sitting around my desk doing nothing. I just knew I was going to be late, and her father would scold me. I was pretty positive a Marine was not too fond of tardiness.

I left work in a mad dash. I ran through the office to my car like an Olympic sprinter going toward the finish line. On the way out the door, I ran over Gary, the temp. This somewhat made me laugh. No one liked Gary; he was a suck-up who was always trying to get a promotion to my position. He was lying on the floor with arms and legs tangled up as if he was playing Twister. I couldn't help but stop and laugh at him. I then remembered how late I was running and darted to my car. I hit the interstate flying. I knew that if I drove ninety that I would only be five minutes late. Just then, I saw blue lights flashing in my rearview mirror. When I saw the cop pulling up behind me, I said so many cuss words that it would have made Howard Stern blush. The elderly cop walked to my window and told me about how dangerous speeding was, and asked where I was going and said that I needed to slow down, etc, etc, etc. I told him that I was a grown man, so either give me a ticket or shut up. He did just that. The first one that is; he gave me the ticket, but he never did

shut up.

As I pulled back in the road, I was five minutes away from where I needed to be, and I was already ten minutes late. I knew that this would not sit well with her parents, especially her father. I really wanted to impress this Marine, but I most likely had failed before I had even gotten there. I remembered my fiancé telling me how in high school if she was two minutes late for her curfew, he would ground her for a solid month. She also told me if her mom did not have food on the table at six-thirty, he would run all over the house ranting and raving. This man was a stickler for punctuality, which I was lacking at this very moment. A million things were racing through my head about what he was going to do or say to me.

All of a sudden, my daydream was interrupted by a smash of glass on the windshield. I slammed on my brakes thinking I must have hit someone. This really threw me into a frenzy. What had I hit? The car in front of me pulled over. It must have come from the car. I was about to give this driver a piece of my mind. I could feel my blood boiling as if I was going to be sent into a frenzy like the Incredible Hulk or Mr. Hyde. The woman walked up to me crying, "I am so sorry; I am sorry." Over and over again. A bag of groceries had come out of her trunk when she hit a bump on a bridge. She told me she would pay for whatever damage had been done to my car. I told her, "Oh, you will pay." As I looked at my cracked windshield and thought of how late I already was, I lost control. I started rummaging through her car finding something of hers I could destroy, and there was what looked like a Boy Scout uniform with a bunch of medals on it. This was the only thing I saw in her car that I could tear up. That was all she had in there. I said, "This should do," as I ripped the uniform into shreds and threw the medals over the side of the bridge. She cried with horror saying, "No, no, no, no, don't do that, my husband will kill me." I laughed at her and said, "Well, I guess you are dead then." I then took the V-8 I had been drinking and slung it all over her white button-up blouse. I decided to leave before the cops got there.

I raced downtown and finally made it into the restaurant. Her father looked at me in a very perturbed manner as my fiancé stood up and gave me a kiss. Her father commented on my being late. Then he laughed and told me not to worry because it happens to the best of us. As we talked, we kept finding more and more things in common. This guy seemed to really like me. The only reason I wasn't one-hundred percent sure whether or not I wanted to marry

is because I had heard about what a psycho my fiancé's dad was. I now knew I would fit in perfectly with this family, and I was now ready for my wedding day. I loved this girl and her dad. Maybe this day wasn't turning out so badly after all. He then asked my fiancé where her mother was and why was she running late. My fiancé had no idea where her mother was either. I then saw a lady walking into the restaurant toward our table with red juice all over her shirt. "Wonder what happened to Mom," my bride-to-be said.

Maybe this wasn't the girl for me, after all.



Illustrator: Nate Lias

Grandma's Secret

By Robyn Sartin

Ever since I can remember, my grandmother has been a mysterious person. For some odd reason, Halloween was her favorite holiday. Do not get me wrong; she loved Christmas and Thanksgiving, but for some reason, she went above and beyond her duty for Halloween. Her decorations were bought months in advance and were so extravagant that everyone else's looked like a mockery. As much as she loved the holiday, it surprised me that she wore the same ratty costume every year. Her costume looked very old in appearance. Her hat and gown were faded and very plain, unlike the neighbors' costumes, which were elaborately decorated.

My grandmother was like most grandparents, for the most part. She had gray hair, except hers was long. Her skin was wrinkled; she had a petite frame; her fingers were long and bony, and she walked with a slightly hunched back. The weirdest characteristic was her nose. It was long and skinny and had several knots on it. Despite her unusual and awkward appearance, she had a kind and loving personality. I guess society had made her that way. She loved animals; only her animals were not the typical household pets. She had a frog, a pet owl, spiders, a baby bat, and a black cat.

Like most older people, my grandma went to bed when the sun went down, or so she claimed. When we stayed over for the night, I used to hear my grandma call for our cat, Salem. She would pick up the cat and sneak out to the pump-house behind our wooden shack. I told my older sister a suspicion that I had, but she called me a silly little girl. It did not matter how hard I tried, I was never able to convince my sister that our grandma was a witch, until. . .

One evening, Grandma said she was having some friends stay the weekend. Worst of all, it was Halloween weekend. I was petrified. Friday evening rolled around, and two of Grandma's friends came to stay. At first they seemed like typical little old ladies. Strangely, they greatly resembled my grandma in appearance. They had long, bony fingers and long noses. They even had knots on their noses and had hunched-over backs. The little ladies had each brought their black cats for the weekend as well.

Grandma decked out the house. She carved pumpkins, made caramel apples, had three black iron cauldrons, and three old brooms. These brooms looked like they had seen better days. I was

young and curious. I had to know how Grandma knew these ladies. When I asked them, they looked at each other and went back to their rocking chairs and knitting. They would not reveal anything about themselves, not even their ages or hometowns.

After all the trick-or-treaters had come and gone, my sister and I took off our costumes and readied ourselves for bed. Grandma and her friends did not take off their costumes. They huddled and whispered and very hurriedly sent us to bed. I lay awake in bed, twiddling my thumbs. Why was everyone acting so spooky? I heard the squeaky screen door slam. I listened as Grandma and her friends talked in a muffled scream. They were talking loudly enough so that they could hear each other, but they were trying to conceal their voices from my sister and me. It sounded like they were headed for our rickety wooden pump-house.

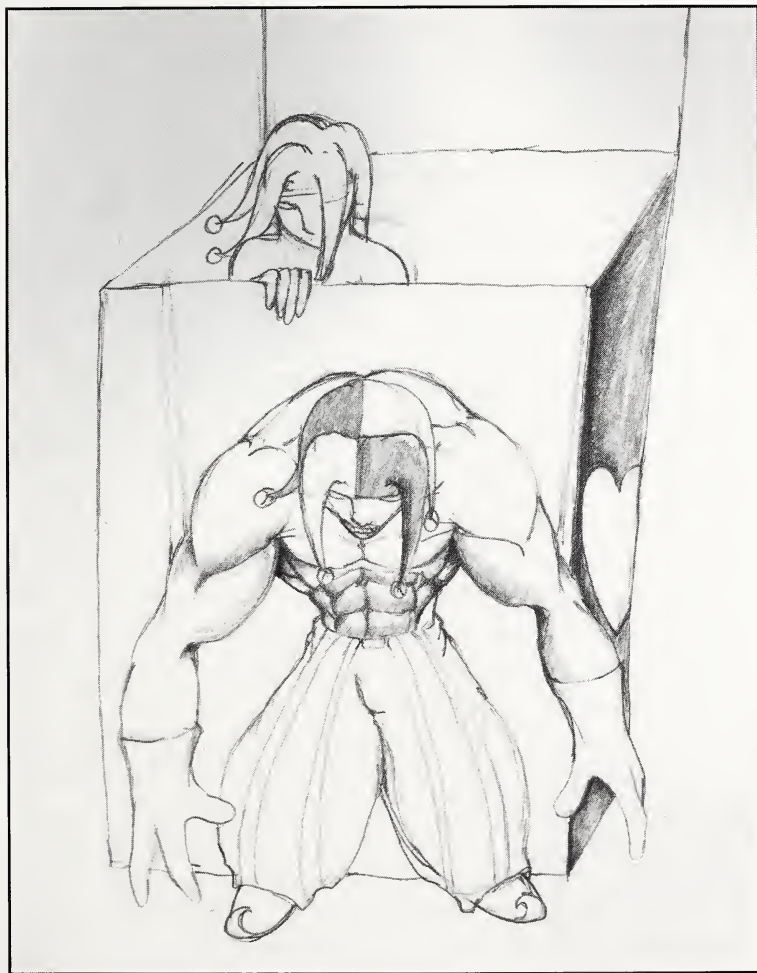
I panicked as fear rushed over my body like a horrible fever. A hundred questions circled my head like a swarm of angry jelly-fish. I had to know. I mustered enough courage to sneak out of bed, only to find out I wish I would have stayed snuggled in my bed.

I carefully tip-toed down the stairs and walked to the back door. I was extra careful in closing the rickety door so that it did not make a sound. I felt rebellious as I snuck to the pump-house, hiding in the shadows so I would not be seen.

I peered in the broken window and saw the most horrible sight. It looked like a scene right out of a scary Halloween movie was being filmed in our backyard. The pump-house was filled with blue and green smoke, coming straight from a black cauldron lit by a fire. "Eye of newt, liver of frog" was all I heard before I fell off of the plastic bucket I was standing on. I quickly hid as I heard the three-some come outside. "Please don't find me. Please don't find me," I remember praying. I wiped my brow and discovered that it was sweaty as they went back to their black magic. I found a sturdier object to stand on and looked back into the window. The hunched-back little women were stirring the cauldron with massive ladles, laughing hysterically and staring into the sky. It was at this point I noticed a hole in the ceiling, one I had not noticed being there before. The black cats were at their feet, backs arched, their hair standing on end; it seemed as though they were laughing with them.

I ran back into the house trying terribly to awaken my sister. She was dead asleep. What kind of potion were they making? Were they going to poison us? The last thing I remember was Grandma's friends leaving. They packed up their 1980 Volkswagen mini-van

and left. The van was oddly colored, blue and green. After the departure of the strange guests, I lay down. I was so exhausted that I could barely stand on my own two feet. When I woke-up, I went to the bathroom to wash my face. As I was washing my face, I began to notice that something was different. My nose appeared longer and bonier. My face was not my own. I looked into the mirror, and staring back at me, was Grandma. What has happened? Who am I?



Illustrator: Nate Lias

Hanging on to Hope

By Marian L. Brown

We had been childhood sweethearts and were still very much in love. Everyone around the university campus knew that Diane Williams and Michael Ramsey were the perfect couple. For the last two years, they had been voted the Campus Favorites. On May 29, 2005, we graduated from Southern University of New Orleans. We had anxiously waited for that day to come. It was on that very day that I asked for Diane's hand in marriage. After the graduation ceremony, I got down on my knees in front of the entire graduating class and presented a one-half-karat diamond ring to her. Diane could not believe her eyes. With tears in her eyes, she accepted my proposal. Our wedding date was set for February 14, 2006.

Diane was in the top tenth of students in the nursing program. She would soon take her test to become a registered nurse. A month later, she received her certification and accepted a job at Charity Hospital. I had accepted a full-time position at the New Orleans Daily Leader newspaper office. Michael Ramsey, the journalist, and Diane Ramsey, the nurse. It had a nice ring to it. We were both eager to start our new jobs and begin our lives as Mr. and Mrs. Ramsey.

On August 29, 2005, a tragic storm swept through many states, destroyed many homes and claimed many lives. According to the TV reporters, the monster storm was on its way to New Orleans. The winds traveled at tremendous speeds, hurling throughout the city. It had been raining for days. The water had begun to rise. Vehicles were floating through the water-filled streets, like boats on a river. The winds and waters rushed against homes and tall buildings. Many people had already left the city. I knew that I needed to make preparations to evacuate the city as well.

The first thing that morning, I tried to contact Diane. She had worked the night before at the hospital. When my phone rang, I was sure that it was her. My father's voice was on the other end of the line. I could hear my mother's voice in the background saying for me not to wait too long before getting on the road. The weather conditions had worsened. I continued to call the hospital. All I got was a recording saying that all the circuits were busy. I began to worry as I paced the floor. I knew that I needed to get out of the city, but I had to wait for Diane. I just could not leave the city without my future wife. For a moment, I began to daydream about her. I just could not

imagine my life without Diane.

I jumped into my car and headed for Charity Hospital. When I got close, I found that all entrances into the hospital were closed. No one was being allowed in, and no one could get out. The policeman there was directing everyone to leave. I followed the others on the streets and headed toward I-55, going north. The people had begun to scatter. The traffic moved slowly along the highway. I continued to dial, still no answer. As I looked into my rearview window, I saw an eighteen-wheeler rapidly approaching. I wondered if it was going to stop. I thought of Diane and my parents. All of a sudden, everything turned black.

When I woke up, I was in the hospital. I put my hand to my head and felt the bandages that covered my entire head. There was a nurse sitting next to my bed. She immediately called for the doctor. "How did I get here, and why am I here?" I asked.

"You've been in a coma for three months," said the doctor. "The name is Ward, by the way, and this is Nurse Betty. She's been looking after you since you arrived. You should take it easy young man. You were in really bad shape when you arrived. You are very fortunate to be alive. Just rest for now, I will give you more details tomorrow."

The next day, Dr. Ward asked if I remembered anything about that day. Everything was still a little hazy, but I knew that I had spoken with my parents and was trying to reach Diane on the cell phone when I was struck by something from the back of my car. I saw blackness, and I passed out. Where is she, I must speak with my fiancé immediately? Where are my parents? Why aren't they here?

"I have notified your parents that you are awake. They are staying at a nearby hotel and will be here first thing in the morning. They will give you all of the details when they arrive, said the doctor.

What was the doctor not telling me? I am sure that it had something to do with Diane. As soon as my parents arrived, they informed me that Diane's parents had not survived the storm. They never made it out of the city. Also, there had been no news about Diane. There are so many people unaccounted for since the storm. The rescue teams are still working really hard trying to locate missing individuals. The storm has left many families in turmoil.

Something inside of me, like a gut-feeling, told me that she was somewhere safe. She had been at the hospital attending to the victims during the storm. If she was not dead, surely the hospital would have reported it by now.

I needed to really focus on my recovery so that I could get out of this hospital and begin searching for her. I spent hours in therapy with Nurse Betty. She was very helpful. She also gave me encouraging words, which gave me hope. I expressed much of how I felt about Diane and our life together. Betty reminded me a lot of Diane, especially her smile. She'd always listened attentively to what I had to say. She also told me that she could understand the pain that I experienced and that she knew I deeply loved Diane. We were becoming closer every day. I considered her a friend. She had found my journal and read some of my work and encouraged me to begin writing down my feelings. She believed that this would help with my recovery.

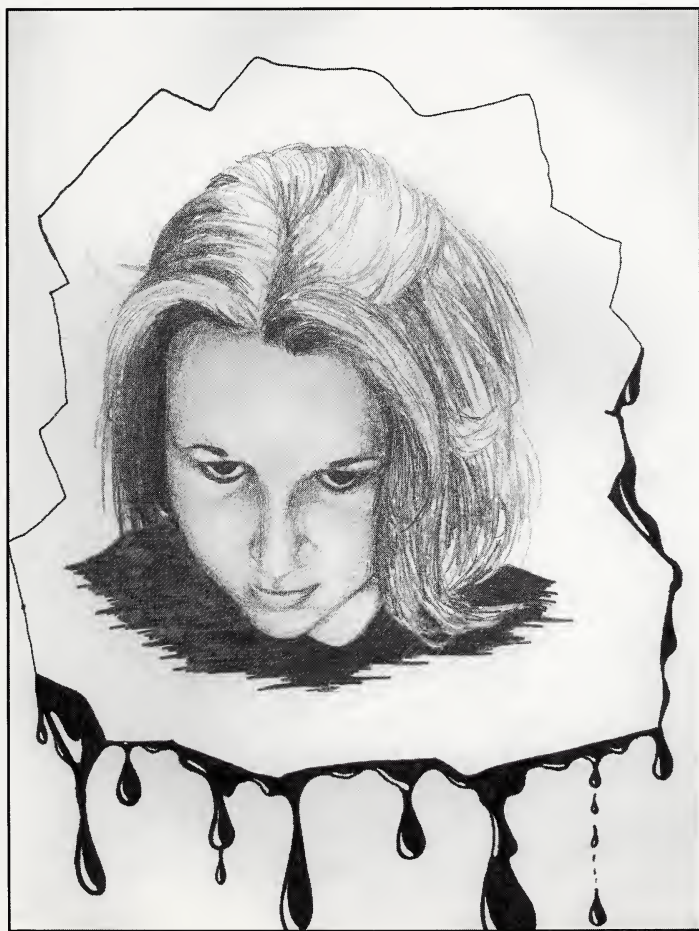
I began to write in my journal daily. I remembered how Diane enjoyed reading my work. She always told me that I would someday be a great journalist and make her proud. At that moment it came to me. I began writing down my memories of the storm and the accident. I believed that it would make a great story. I would find Diane, and she would help me. Together, we will produce my first bestseller. Remembering her beautiful smile brought a pain to my soul. Oh, how I missed her. Instead of sitting around feeling sorry for myself, I began to write every day. In a few weeks, I was being released from the hospital.

My follow-up appointment with Dr. Ward was scheduled for 2:00 p.m. that day. My session with the doctor was fantastic. He gave me a really good report. I was excited and felt like celebrating. My only regret was that Diane was not there. I called Betty to give her the news. We decided to meet after she finished work. I suggested an early movie and dinner. She would be getting off work around 3:00 p.m. The movie started at 3:45, so I hurried to the parking garage to bring the car around, but it would not start. We'd have to take a taxi to get there on time. There was always one or two waiting in front of the hospital. There happened to be just one, so I approached him and asked him for a ride. He told me that he was waiting for his regular 3:00 pickup but was sure that she wouldn't mind if I dropped them by the theater. Betty came out a few minutes early, so we jumped into the taxi and continued our conversation that we had started on the phone.

The driver said that Ms. Williams would arrive within the next few minutes. We never stopped talking or paid him any attention when he called the name.

"There she is;" the driver said, "she is coming out of the hospital

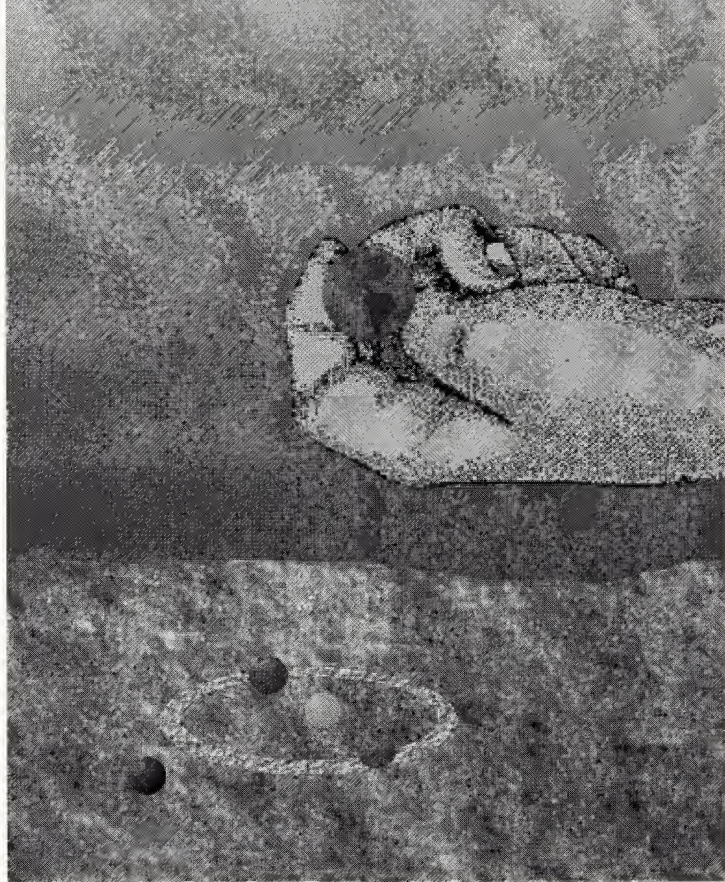
now." The car door opened; she sat in the front seat with the driver. We never looked up or stopped talking. Suddenly, I caught a glimpse of her from the mirror. I grabbed Betty's hand and began to squeeze it. She did not know what was wrong with me. I thought that I would pass out in the back seat of the car. I leaned forward and said, "Excuse me, Miss." She turned and said, "Pardon me, Sir." I could not believe my eyes. It was my Diane.



Illustrator: Mallory Blalock

Microcosm

2007-2008



Illustrator: Jessi Aldridge

Essays

Born Fisher

By Jennifer O. Griffith

I am a fisher of men; I can spot a good man from a bad man in the blink of an eye. My skills of fishing for the right man have led me to believe that there are three types of men in the world. There are men our mothers want us to be with, the men no one wants us to be with and the men we were meant to be with.

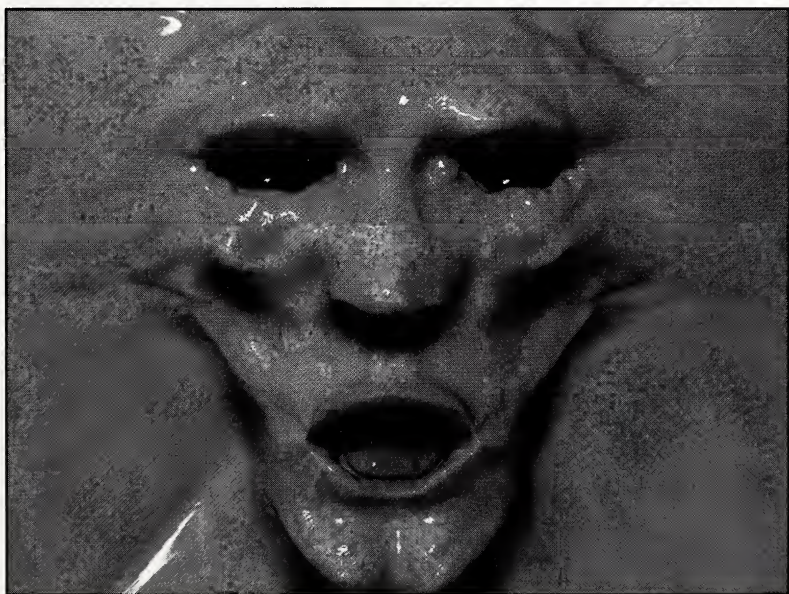
The men our mothers want us to be with are usually men that we do not want to be with. They are shy "good boys" who never step out of line, study hard and are sugar-sweet at all times. They are usually the children of our mother's friends, and therefore perfect for anyone. These men never speak up, are submissive, and never disagree with his or anyone else's mother. Most are wallflowers that are socially inept; also, they are chosen by mothers because they look safe. A good boy would never try anything, never have a girl in after her curfew, and never harm her in any way. They are a good catch, but they are sometimes boring. They are the boys who would rather stay at home than go to a party. If one of these fish come my way, I usually treat him gently and try to let him go back into the water with as little harm as possible.

The men who nobody wants us to be with should, by contrast, be described as "bad boys." They are the men that our mothers, fathers and anyone with any sense, do not want their daughter/friend to be with. They are the men that cannot be counted on, trusted, or loved. They are controlling, dangerous, and do not care about anyone but themselves. Parents fear that their child will date one of these wild children and get hurt. The only thing bad boys are good for is breaking good girls' hearts. Bad boys love to control whomever they are dating; they are in no way similar to the sweet good boys that our mothers choose. Girls date bad boys to defy their parents, but only end up hurting themselves. They are the boys who know where every party is on Friday night, and they visit each one with or without their significant other but always have a girl on their arm. Whenever I catch one of these boys, I make sure to use the catch and release method; they are not worth catching, and the only good they do is to steal bait from the hook.

The final type of man is the one that every girl wants to be with. These are the men who are good friends and slowly turn into true loves. These are the men who are not the first to be chosen, but are

the best men in the world. They are patient, liked by parents, and a little bit of both the good and bad boy. They do not mind being submissive or dominate; they are easy-going and make any woman happy to be with them. They are the kind that makes a dull party something special by offering a last dance, cup of punch, or a ride home to a girl dumped by the ever-present bad boy. When I catch a fish like this, I set him aside in a separate tank. He may not look like much in the muddy water, but he shines in the sunlight.

As a champion fisher of men, I find most men are easy to identify. Sometimes I do have trouble trying to recognize a man's type. Every once in a while I have to re-categorize a good boy to the bad boy group and sometimes a good boy will end up being a real catch. If a really tricky fish is giving me trouble and I can't seem to reel him in, I cut the line and return the next day to find the one that got away.



Illustrator: Jake Smith

Mid-Point

By Bridge Nail
(Dustin Sutton)

Middle point, this is where I stand, not in a cowardly fashion, it's simply where I am. Hosted inside of my body, I'm living in a house that isn't my own. However, I know I hover there; my spirit suspended in the void of timelessness, I find my real home.

Past, present, and future—these things weren't always foreign knowledge. I am an entity, a human spirit; I've experienced life in these terms. Yet, now I stand on center ground and take in life's view, plagued by my own presence. My true house belongs to no one else. It is mine, throughout the span of existence.

This house in rural-nowhere was meant to be my inheritance; it and all its land. My first memory is pertaining to this house. With a strong brick foundation and surroundings of solid oak, no one could ever deny its strength. Now it's as though all my memories are one—this house.

I can remember walking to one of the back doors after a swim; I watch the water fall as I plunge from the pool, as it drips upon a concrete surface. For yards around me, I am enclosed by a fence which houses this man-made body of water, along with half of the home and two-story garage. Looking upward, the only things visible are calming skies and soothing forest.

The doorway I choose leads to the washroom, with an old, yet sturdy, washing machine and dryer set and a deep freezer; it is also my feline companion's room. It contains the bottom of a clothes-shoot along with several storage shelves and cabinets, and was the base for most of my phone conversations throughout the years. The windows on the door and wall make it seem as though I am still in the backyard. I can feel her presence there, even though I'm not physically in that room.

My feline companion was my friend all the way through life in this house, as well as a good bit afterwards. She lived an extraordinarily long life for her species and was the only true constant in my existence. I've had other cats since her, but she was my feline counterpart. No matter how much I loved the others, I always felt that she was still around, almost as if she were watching. Although well taken care of, they have all died young. This has raised my eyebrow more than once or twice. My companion also mourned the loss of this house, mainly her room; I could see it in her decline

upon departure.

This room led into the kitchen area, which is nice and expansive, split in half by a small overhang in the ceiling. There are appliances and preparation areas occupying one side and a dining room adorned by a small brick fireplace on the other. Light shines from the glass in the panes as brightly as the rest of the house. One can barely imagine how many feet have trodden this location during the course of numerous meals and holiday occasions.

Crossing this area to the right is the ever-trampled hallway, holding a small half bathroom. The music room is immediately to the left as I turn in that direction. Many times I played its vertical piano and rehearsed my violin for hours in a sitting. When closed, the bi-fold doors looked like four long louver shutters. It was all right here where I gained the knowledge that my being was destined to be reigned by the arts.

Turning to the right in these interconnected hallways is a long, straight path with a small coat closet on the right-hand and the front door on the left. Outside, the yard is massive. A tire swing was hung from many of the tall trees and a stilted fort was just past the double carport in the garage. Countless paths had been worn through the vastness of surrounding trees, all of which I lurked amidst during my youth. The winding gravel road had also seen its share of travel.

Continuing forward through the downstairs hallway lands me at the three-way junction between the den, my grandfather's bedroom, and the bottom of the stairway. As I remember this vicinity, it is as though I'm truly there, watching myself venture up those tall steps, either on my own or carried as an infant. It is an eerie feeling to stare back into one's own eyes.

The den appears colossal with its vaulted ceiling. One half is adorned with an overabundance of display shelves above the cabinets. A large stone fireplace with a mantle identical to the kitchen's joins the two sides of the far wall together. The den's other side is open and bare, with sunlight hammering in through the rustic door and windows. I found this room to be most inviting at night. No other place in the house had such comforting, natural vibes surrounding it. In all but the corners where the ceiling met the walls, something sinister seemed to lurk; I dreamed of it quite often.

My grandfather's bedroom is the only one to sleep the same occupant throughout my memory. It had its own bathroom, dual-sink, and walk-in closet. The sleeping quarters had blinding white shelves and cabinets, which were accentuated by the same sort of external

light source as in the den. Its structure was pleasant, but I always felt disturbed by the enormous amount of white.

The stairs were built against the wall and had a guardrail on the right that extended part of the way. The handrail to the left led all the way into the enclosure, which was always one of my favorite spots due to its pleasant shade from the constant presence of light. At the head of the stairs, another small closet could be seen, placed oddly as though it were meant only for decoration. This staircase was the focal point of one of my grandmother's favorite tales: She believes that I once saw a spirit there when I was a baby. As she climbed the stairs, I would peer over her shoulder and say that I saw a spirit with long hair hanging in its face, and as she would descend, I would say that I saw it at the top. Although I thought she sounded crazy when she told it, something about the story was unsettling.

Upon going left in the upstairs hallway, I bring myself to the door at the end, opening to one of the three bedrooms. It was originally my mother's, with a window that gave way to a nice view of the backyard. Two closets were on either side of this window and connected by floor cabinets that gave the window its sitting area. Eventually, this bedroom would belong to my grandmother, where she and I would sit and talk into the early hours of the mornings.

At the other end of the hall is the bedroom that I claimed during the majority of life in my home. It was once my uncle's, but eventually belonged to me and then to my sister. Unlike all the other rooms, its walls were naked with only another window overlooking the backyard. A closet with bi-folding doors was nested into the left wall next to the corner of the window. In my entire recollection, it was always missing one of those doors, which forever bothered me. The bare confines of the room gave me a sense of limitlessness. I could arrange my earthly pleasures and comforts to fit my wishes in any way I pleased. Another of my grandmother's tales originates here. I was absent, shall we say, and while she was trying to "cleanse" my room, a dresser had somehow moved in front of the door when she closed it behind her. My grandfather had to break the window to get in. I have argued plenty logical causes for this incident, but something about it perplexes the whole family.

Outside of this window is the roof, the same roof accessible from the other bedrooms, but it was in this section where I would sit at night during most of my childhood and adolescence. Something about smoking a cigarette, among other activities, is made much more enjoyable by sitting here under the night sky. I could always

count on turning around to the open windowsill to see the breeze causing the curtains to dance. It was also reassuring to see my feline companion perched there, staring at me with her big, blue eyes.

The door on the left, from this end of the hallway, leads to the attic. Being un-insulated, it was always either very stuffy or too cold. Nevertheless, it did serve as my uncle's preferred spot in which to entertain guests with plenty of hiding spaces for his means of enjoyment.

The upstairs bathroom is where the top of the laundry shoot could be found. It was split into two rooms; one for the dual sinks and one for the bathing area. Above each of the two sinks are mirrors; these are the only household items I have left from my home. I remember looking into these mirrors on many adventures; I can still see me peering back at myself now.

The third bedroom was positioned directly across from the entrance of the upstairs foyer. It is here where life in this house began and ended for me. Commonly referred to as the "baby room," it held another large closet with bi-folding doors and two cabinet and shelf systems, all of which were painted blue. These were found on either side of a window in the recess. This room was mine in childhood and all of my youth, but served as my sister's from the end of her early childhood until middle adolescence. Perhaps, I should have seen winding up back where I started as the end; everything had come full circle.

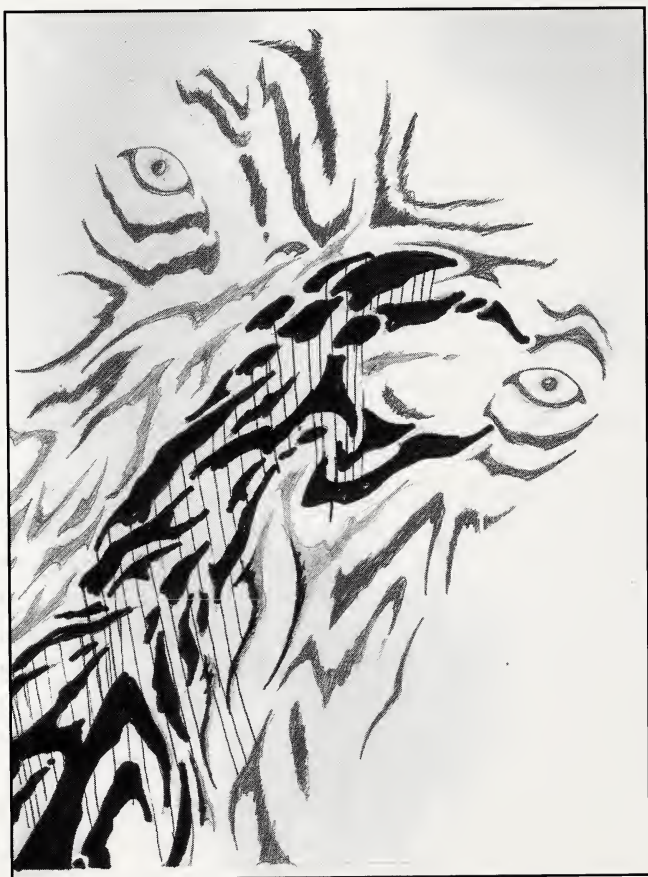
Although I wasn't living in the house at the time, I was residing on the edge of my land, and everything was still to be mine. However, life happened through no one's fault, forcing my grandfather to relinquish the house and all but a few acres to the highest bidder. I watched my inheritance taken from my grasp and bought for less than a quarter of its worth by my grandfather's brother. It is now used as a lodge for wealthy out-of-state hunters. My property, my fields, and my animals, all treaded upon, now, by strange persons at random moments. I feel desecrated.

I've recently learned that my house could possibly be back on the market. This both enrages me and fills me with hope. But, how could I ever afford it? It is so strange to hear—my own voice questioning how I might regain my own home.

My last journey, which was purely unintentional, has shown me what I am. I'm at the core of my life. What was is foresight and what is to come is remembrance, only in this instance am I simply being.

I was the one trying to let everyone know that the house is mine. I

saw me watching myself carried up and down the stairs; I moved the objects around in protest of the inescapable outcome; I am the voices everyone still claims to hear; I am the reflection in the mirror. I have haunted this house; in essence, I haunt myself.



Illustrator: Nate Lias

Operation Morning

By Casey Hardison-Pevey

As my morning begins, I find myself questioning the moral fiber of a bar of sensitive skin soap. No Ivory fresh or lavender smells for me -- migraines -- started about a year ago. Though I shouldn't complain, I rather enjoy the smell of nothing on my skin. It saves me from awkward, "You smell good" moments. ... back to the soap, that no good, sorry, no smelling, bar of mush plots on jumping from my grip every ten seconds, every morning, just to throw me off. I run out of hot water, shampoo, rosemary (that doesn't hurt for some reason) still in my hair—I am last in line—my comfort is not a necessity; it is a luxury. I know; I know; I read the contract.

I step out of the shower, and the cotton operative has, once again, confiscated my towel, so I must slip into MIA mode (Mother In Action); I have been trained for situations such as this. I must retrieve a towel, lest I be poked, pulled, prodded, or accosted in some manner while in the buff-- a position of vulnerability -- to say the least. I locate a towel, dirty, something stuck to it -- I do not dare ponder what—and wipe the remaining droplets of water from my skin in under three seconds, as I have been conditioned, and I begin to search for my gear: shirt, appropriate covering-- lift, no stomach, twist, no binding; bottoms, bend over-- no crackerjack, AKA, storage compartment for anything small enough to fit. I must check the perimeter for incoming. I know I must be smooth, fearless; I know I must get dressed. There is an unspoken conspiracy. All my senses, neurons, neurological pathways, and, I think, my ligaments may have even been involved, had a meeting, and the consensus is what I now call operation insanity. To them, it is a game; to me, it is war.

Now, I must gather the troops, rally them, dress them in their gear and proceed from location alpha to location omega. This is a rebellious team. They run, they dart, they hide, they even dare to laugh at their superior officer. This is close to anarchy. They fall in-- gear on, clean-- I am not sure. We go down the list: hair, brushed, check -- teeth, brushed, check --satchel, operation plan folder (signed), check. Now we move. Private First-born moves into the vehicle with ease. She knows she must for the sake of the mission be in position with appropriate restraints in order. Private Second-born, however, is a different breed of soldier. Her will has not been molded to my way of thinking. She does not understand the big picture

objective that the MIA officer is the top dog—that EVERYTHING must be cleared through me. She is still trying to defy the system—my system. I begin the routine. In the seat, strap, buckle. Resistance begins; I must stay in control as the canine offenders begin their assault—one to my left—one to my right. My own satchel falls from my back where it innocently rested and pounces private second-born on the head. As the canine offenders begin to enter the vehicle, Private First-borns handles them accordingly and prevents a situation; she has been trained for situations such as this! Private Second-born -- still not strapped in. Finally, disaster is averted, and we begin movement toward destination Omega.

The team decides we need a distraction, so we turn on the radio. I am out-voted by my team. We listen to a barrage of melodies that pierce my brain like a tiny drill just above my left eye. They have discovered the “repeat” function on the instrumentation of our vehicle. I am stuck. My ligaments high- fiving inside my body as “I love you, you love me, we’re a happy family...” resounds in my mind for the rest of the mission. I refuse to give in to the urge to sing along; my team would then see me as weak. An MIA must never show signs of weakness. Her team can smell it like rabid dogs, and they will turn on her the same way. We are reaching mid-point when it begins. Internal chaos—a revolution... this is anarchy. I know it has begun as a standard issue Velcro, size 8, flies by my head followed by a Tootsie Pop -- which, consequently, sticks to the side of my hair. With my right arm, I make one fell swoop. This is not a success. I am accosted, once again on the same side of the head as the Tootsie Pop, with a Dora the Explorer cup-- not standard issue-- must have been smuggled in. I pull the vehicle over on the side of the road, just as the manual says and begin operation punishment. Private First-born is removed and reprimanded as I motion civilians to keep moving. Private Second-born receives the same punishment as I offer her to civilians who honk their horns as I flag them on. With everyone intact, we resume our mission. Upon reaching our destination, I deposit Privates First and Second born to their commanding officers for the day. At last I reach destination Omega and walk in the room. My class covers their mouths and begin to giggle. “How was your morning?” they ask. I forgot to get the Tootsie Pop out of my hair.

A Faithful Friend

By Amber Sbravati

When I think back on my life, most of the great markers and memories can be related to a car. I once owned a small champagne-colored Honda Accord. Though it was an everyday boring sedan on the outside, with the exceptions of various political bumper stickers and scars, it was always my partner-in-crime, my home, my comrade. The stunts my friends and I pulled in it will forever remain with me. This humble automobile was my unconditional ally.

I received this car as a graduation present from my parents. This was so I would have a safe, reliable ride. They did not know how true this statement would become or how much this gift would really mean to me. As my high school graduation gift, this was a symbol of my achievement. Staying in school and graduating with honors is something I will always be so proud of. Because so many of my friends and peers had dropped out of school, I felt that I had achieved something remarkable. This car was a scream “Congratulations” for everyone to see. Even after high school, everyone would instantly know what I had achieved by this car, which I was usually driving.

There were times when this humble Honda was my home. Once, some of my friends and I took a trip to Tennessee to see a ton of musicians. As my little car trucked along the state highways, we anticipated the sight we were soon to behold—thousands of people coming together to hear music. On arrival, my little honey-colored car stuck out like a sore thumb. It was among the wild, multi-colored VW vans and jalopies hauled there by the thousands of hippies who would inhabit the small farm the festival would take place on. Here, my little sedan would be my, and a fellow listener’s home for seven days. It was not the most comfortable accommodation, but it was a sweet relief from the hot summer tent we would have otherwise slept in. The tiny CD player gave us entertainment during the mornings by blasting Neil Young’s “Harvest” CD until our hippie neighbors could no longer suffer. Needless to say, we cranked the volume up anyway. When rain and winds tore our tent down, my little sedan did not budge while we hid inside, waiting for the storm to pass. On the other days, when the sun beat down mercilessly, it was a much-needed escape. Since there was hardly any shade or other relief to be found, we would get in and run the air conditioner

for a few moments. We hoped that the trusty motor would bear the torture of the sun. That gave us extreme luxury among the other festival goers. Finally, on the way back, it was able to pull itself out of the muddy grove by crawling up the steep muddy hill, and it took us back across a few states, back to our normal lives.

Actually, my car saw more concerts than most people probably have. On one occasion, we went to a concert in Jackson, Mississippi. It served as a refuge for some parking lot venders hiding from persecution. These grungy nomads were in trouble for making bootleg band T-shirts. Police combed through the crowd and lot but did not find them. They were squatted beside my car, a girl about my age and size, her brother, and her boyfriend. I allowed them to hop in, so not to be seen. As the night progressed, we became friends. Helping them run their stand as they took a break and getting free things from them was more fun than the show that we had gone to see. The next morning, my car was the always-reliable ride home. Never needing to guess if it would work and just knowing that I could count on it was so wonderful. It is the only car I have ever owned that came with this confidence.

There were so many other countless adventures that I made it endure. Have you ever been mud riding in a sedan? On several occasions, we loaded up and took off hauling through black woods and pits. We would take it out at night. Lighted by the stars and moon above us, we would tear through the night hoping for the best. It was so fun hanging out the window as we hit ditches and bumps. We even rode so rough one night the bumper got ripped off. It was an ugly face without the bumper; it looked like hell.

I never knew something inanimate could be so loyal. Truthfully, I'm not sure if anything else ever can be. Not a single time did that car fail me. Through thick and thin, high and low, it was there to bail me out or get me home. I do not think I treated it as well as I could have. It took all of my mistreatments, like late oil changes or mud on it and never punished me in any way. For that, I loved my car. My most loyal friend and companion--my car.

Pain

An Exploratory Essay

By Steven Covington

When most people think of pain, many would think of breaking an arm or getting a shot. I guess my thoughts on pain are somewhat different. Pain for me is not that definition at all. Pain is not being able to play the sport I love, football. It is somewhat comical that in this very sport that causes my pain, I am called upon to inflict pain on others. I also know going into the game of football that I will probably have to endure some physical pain as well. I recall sitting in the locker room with my wrists taped tight and my sweatbands strategically placed on my arms. As I got there, the butterflies kicking my insides caused a nervous stomach pain. This was a pain I had felt so many times before every game. It is a pain that I do not want anyone to notice, for fear of being thought of as weak. The pain I felt before the games was a nervous pain. The odd thing about this pain was the fact that right at kickoff, whenever I got hit or hit someone, the pain would vanish. This was always odd to me. I had to feel hurt or inflict pain to make another form of pain go away. Sometimes, the joy I felt by scoring a touchdown would be followed by a deep inner pain when I saw a yellow penalty flag on the field. This may be one of the worst forms of pain because of the fact that I would go from a state of elation to feeling let down. I remember one time when I had scored a touchdown and it had been called back for a penalty, I yelled at one of my teammates. When I yelled at him, I could tell that it caused him pain. The fact that I caused my teammate pain also caused me pain because he was not only my teammate, he was also my friend.

I can also remember the pain I felt after each loss. I am a very competitive person, maybe more so than anyone else I know. So a loss for me would feel like someone had ripped my heart out, slammed it on the ground, and then started jumping up and down on it. The loss also may be taken so hard because I put my heart into practice each week, bang into my friends for four days straight, and run wind sprints. My teammates and I go through all that pain during the week in hopes of experiencing some joy on Friday night. And when Friday night comes, I am let down. The next Monday after a loss there would be pain as well. The coaching staff would be none too pleased with the performance on Friday night. They would show

us the game film and yell at us for our mistakes. The yelling caused pain in some of my friends. I could see it in their eyes and in their facial expressions. If we had played a particularly bad game on Friday night, then Monday brought a major pain upon us. We had to hit the field running for making mistakes, not performing well, or for lack of effort. This not only brought pain upon us while we were doing it, but it also brought pain thinking about what we were going to have to do as we sat in class all day.

I can remember a cool November night on our home field. It was Senior Night. It was our last home game of the year. As I thought of not playing another home game, it brought a tremendous amount of pain to me. I was not the only one who felt pain on this night. I know that all the coaches, fans, and family would miss us as well. I don't believe that I was feeling the most pain that night, however. I could see the pain, maybe even some tears well up in my parents' eyes. They knew that their son was growing up and would have to face the trials and tribulations of the real world soon. My parents did not want to think that, for some reason, I was growing up a little bit. The pain for them was that they might have thought they were losing me. I also knew if anyone was feeling pain there that night, it was my daddy. He coached me and all my friends in Pee Wee football. From fourth to the sixth grade, my daddy roamed the sidelines as young kids scored touchdowns and made tackles for him. I knew he would also miss seeing all of the kids that he had taught the game of football. My daddy brought us all together and told us all to play one more game for Coach Covington. That speech he gave us made me reminisce about my younger days, which gave me a sadness of how things once were. We ended up losing the game that night, which caused a great deal of pain for me and my fellow seniors.

After that game, I sat around and reflected on the many times I had almost lost the game of football before that night. I recall being in the seventh grade on the junior-high team. The first week of practice, I was ready to quit. The ninth graders seemed so huge. They looked like they could easily inflict pain on my small 135-pound frame. Also, I had never heard so much yelling in my life; it seemed like we got yelled at for everything. When I was young, I hadn't developed thick skin yet, and the yelling really caused me pain. Also, during and after every practice, we would run so much. This running caused a deep pain all over my body. After the first week of practice, I wanted to quit. Luckily, I stuck with it. I also recalled a time during my junior year when I was playing against Copiah Academy.

The Copiah runner was carrying the ball, and I was ready to tackle and inflict some pain on him. All of a sudden, I felt a sharp sensation of pain in my right knee. Someone had come and blocked me and stuck his helmet in my right knee. I lay on the field and screamed in pain. I thought my football career was over with just that one play on the first game of the season. Thinking of that also caused me immense pain. Thankfully, I had only bruised my knee and would play again.

Friday night, I was at my brother's football game. It made me sad that I was not taking part in the contest. Whenever we scored our first touchdown, tears began to form in my eyes. I thought: Were these tears of pain or tears of joy? This was an experience unlike any other. That is why I always find it paradoxical that for me to relieve this pain, I must relive this pain.



Illustrator: Derrick Veals

Death Is Coming

An Exploratory Essay

By Brian Hairston

My biggest fear in life is to die. I don't know, maybe I'm just not satisfied with living and dying like any normal human being on the planet. It's just that life and death are both so dusty and old. I have been led to believe that since the beginning of time, that death is a normal part of life. If it is, then, why do I feel like death is just a second away at all times, no matter who you are? It comes in all shapes and sizes, ranging from, but not limited to, a skyscraper falling on your head or a fire in the safest place you know—home. Just last year, I was at work when I got a phone call telling me that two of my good friends had been in a serious car accident.

When I finally got to see them later that day and I heard their "Final Destination" style account they had with death, I thought to myself that they should be dead. Seventy mph, heavy rain, two bald back tires, and one inconsiderate #@&*% are all it took for death to come into play. Yes, they lived to tell the story: they had cheated death. With the conditions as I explained and cars bearing down on them, they should have been dead.

My friend who was driving had hit his head and was having a seizure. His flailing foot smashed the gas, and the already-turned front wheels allowed the pickup to go from getting t-boned by a large work van to only getting rear-ended by it. Death brushed their souls that day, and they have not been right since. One of them went crazy, and the other...well, I'll just say that he is minus a few family members since he cheated death. Is it coincidence or was death getting revenge for the evasion of the master plan?

Death is irrational, very unmerciful and is a waste of time and good lives. I know it is coming at some point in my life, yet I can do nothing to prevent it. Or can I? Yes, yes I do wish to live forever or at least long enough to see the human race evolve past death. Will I ever be ready? Will I ever see the human race outrun death? Who knows? All I do know is that death is my number one enemy in life right now. If we could all die in the same manner, then maybe I would be ok with it. But noooooo, people have to kill and be killed by death.

Death is here all around us just waiting for one of us to slip up. Some say death is the beginning, not the end. How do they know?

Is it something as simple and concrete as faith? Is faith concrete at all? What if people have faith in a salvation that isn't even there for them? This wouldn't even be an issue if death found all the deserving rapists and murderers who pray not to get caught. But that's too much to ask death, I assume? Death takes the Goodie Two Shoes who goes to college, and the loving wife and mother. Yet, the rubbish runs rampant and free. Death is not something we can see, yet I run from Death as it chases me like a tiger after its last meal. I am not ready. I have not seen what I want to see in this life. The human race must run, run, run.

We have not yet reached our potential as organisms, and I only see it fair that I be allowed to be part of the day when we evolve past the ugly cockroach. Cockroaches get to live for what seems like forever...with or without their heads. Yes, the most primitive life form in the world laughs at Death, for he has Death's number. The fact that we only use seven percent of our powerful brain, yet do nothing about it, speaks volumes about the human race. Or does it? Maybe we are already way more advanced as organisms but just enslaved by something or someone we have learned to call Death over time. That would explain such a low brain function but yet unfathomable potential, I think.

The way Death hunts us and tracks us down is almost like we don't belong here. Nothing on the planet dies as much as we do. Is it a coincidence or just how life is? Should life even be called life? Do we even know what it means to live life? Are we sure? Creatures that don't even use their brains to their full potential think and say a lot about how life should be lived until death. I say that life is death, happening slowly to all of us in the passing days.

Through the Glass

An Exploratory Essay

By: Lindsey Mills

Whether it is for eyesight of the latest styles, many of us look through the glass on an everyday basis. For most, this eyewear is just an object, but has anyone ever stopped and thought about the many different stories their glasses could tell. Mysteries could be answered, and criminals could be caught. In fact, it's been said, "Commit a crime and the earth is made of glass." Many miracles are displayed right on the other side of that clear lens. Just our day-to-day lives write stories that others will never have the opportunity to experience and tragedies that others will never be able to grasp the heartache that one person might have had to feel.

On a personal note, when I was much younger in age, I took the religious stepping stone of getting baptized at my church. Professing my faith, I sat on the other side of that glass, nose in hand. The congregation had all eyes on me and the chilled water up to my neck. For some, it never came up this high, but I was not at all blessed with height.

Think about it, would some prefer to see images in black and white or through rose-colored glasses? To see or not to see, that is the question, or do some even have the option? The most pathetic person in the world is someone who has sight, but has no vision. Every person has her own unique personality, and this reflects how we view different things. There are people out in our midst who see things positive and hopeful, while others tend to see the negative in things, and simply do not appreciate the great things in life. For example, when looking at a flower, a few will see it scientifically, others will view its beauty and color, but then there will be that handful of men who see it as a weed needing to be mowed over. You see, life is simply what we make of it. We are provided with several choices that we make on our own, but it is up to us to make the best of every possibility.

Through the glass miracles are preformed. Surgery takes place, and babies are delivered. It is where that proud dad stands staring at the most important thing in his life, his new son or daughter, where all of the family and friends get the opportunity to take that first look through the glass at the new-found treasure, or where the students watch and learn how the doctors work with different conditions,

teaching them how they, too, can save lives.

Or perhaps one is visiting the nearby museum searching out the stories behind those glass cases, simply wanting to feel a part of what happened in the past or to see for oneself the way her ancestors lived. Where have those army boots marched? Who did that sword kill? Maybe a better question is, where did the tears fall?

See, everything has a story, and everybody has a past. This will make a person think deeply about the people she sees wearing those famous frames. Where have they been? Where are they going? That is only for them to know, and only for them to understand. In our spare time, however, it is fun to daydream about. Face it, there are places that we will never get to see, and people that we will never have the privilege of meeting.

Looking through the glass is like viewing an unknown world. It is another time, another place, and another philosophy that we may never understand.

Sometimes the statement "through the glass" holds a more dangerous meaning. It can bring back memories for some that they have for so long tried to forget, such as the tragedies of the collision that day that caused great loss to their family, and friends.

It has been said that our eyes are the windows to our hearts. This quote is so true; if only we could really see into the hearts of everyone through the glass; what things would we discover? I will even venture out to say that there are many features of individuals that no soul would care to know about.

Through the glass, through the fence, through those double doors, through the woods, or through the years only time can tell how these things will be, and how it will affect us. Traveling there is like traveling to a mystery place, and not knowing what you will find. It is definitely scary, but wouldn't we all like to know? Doesn't everyone want their own private tour? I do!

Poetry

Poetry Redefined

Catching random thoughts; blending them together
Expressions of the mind sometimes rhyme
Stupid, entertaining, challenging
I can't say what I want to say
Tripping over words I stumble
Some Random words, short, sentency
Challenging, worry some, complicated
Creativeness in lack; Chop the words back
The window to the brilliance of the soul
Jealous despising talented poets
Deepest emotions on the tip of a pen

—Composite Poem of Creative Writing Class

Redemption

She left him standing all alone,
She didn't know why she wanted to go home.
Playing house never was too fun,
Living with him? He's a loaded gun.
She couldn't fathom, couldn't understand
Why she wasted her time on that man.
Sure the times were okay,
But it didn't cut it at the end of the day.
The rat race is getting old,
And half her story isn't told.
What's the use of trying?
She'd just end up crying.
Fighting gets nothing done,
As darkness falls, the dying sun
I come to realize what I have done.
A bitter black sinner, my heart won't beat,
I tremble before God with broken feet.
Having no one to blame,
I willingly played the devil's game.
The strategies were pitiful I have lost,
My body cold and blue accepts frost.
What could I have done?
I cry out for his only son.
I silently pray for Redemption.

—Jennifer O. Griffith

New Beginnings

Questions I asked,
Answers I wanted,
More questions I asked,
More answers I wanted.
Truths I wished to hear,
Not the lies whispered in my ear,
Memories slice into my heart
Shredding it apart,
Like ravenous wolves.
Roll up my tattered sleeves,
Time to start anew,
More questions,
More answers,
If only he knew.

—Robyn Sartin

Forgiveness Sought

I need to know you forgive me,
if I die before break of day?
I too ask why on earth would He?

I need to know you forgive me,
if here tonight with you I plea
it's for life I faithfully pray?

I need to know you forgive me,
if I die before break of day?

—David E. Campbell

Slackers

Sunday slackers take it easy
No need to stress come on relax!
This day can be oh so breezy

Sunday slackers take it easy
Football games or filling brunches
Sunny strolls or long stretched napping

Sunday slackers take it easy
No need to stress come on relax!

—Amber Sbravati

The Babysitter Broke Her Foot

It appears I must miss class today, and yes, to my dismay.
I wish to show my fellow students prudence in my work.
Jerk the rug from beneath my feet, observe me hit the floor.
The door is flung wide open as a token of my shame.
I blame myself and no one else, although the fault's not mine.
My youngest daughter needs her father more than I need knowl-
edge.
It's just as well for, not to brag, I seem to know already
Almost everything you've left to show, yet go and teach the rest.
I do not understand the ones who cannot grasp the ease.
There's nothing to it really, an open mind is all you need.
Test the boundaries as though you were a child in pre-pubescence.
The essence of our language, though complex, is truly moving.
My art forms are the words and music that flows through my soul,
My goal is to infect you all with passion for the same.
See it as a game, if needed, one where we all win.
What you put in you will get back: reward for your free thought.
So ought you all just take a shot and give it all you've got.
I guarantee it's not that hard, discard what's preconceived.
Poetry is art, as well as essays, plays, and entries.
Your journal very well could yield the world's next greatest work.
I myself neglect this journal more than I'd like to admit.
But when I find a moment free, I type until I'm spent.
Dents that cannot be repaired are deep inside myself.
On shelves they sat for years and only laughed me in the face.
It's my place now to take them down and use them for my own.
I've grown a lot in such short time, my mind in overload.

— Bridge Nail (Dustin Sutton)

Smoke

The smoky clouds fill all the air
The black of night turns all but gray
This gasp for breath can try to bear

The smoky clouds fill all the air
Inhale so much one's lungs might tear
Relax, lay back let come what may

The smoky clouds fill all the air
The black of night turns all but gray

—Amber Sbravati

Triolet

Today's the day my dreams come true
Things look my way; it's all ideal
No time for tears; my face not blue
Today's the day my dreams come true
He is the one; my heart just knew
You just can't alter how you feel
Today's the day my dreams come true
Things look my way; it's all ideal.

—Lindsey Mills

Triolet-down

I found in me a better way
Yet fell again into the past
Fresh morning, sky clear in new day
I found in me a better way
Bright sunbeams caught in windy sway
Gray haze and damp fog falls at last
I found in me a better way
Yet fell again into the past

—G. Gill

Oppression

History so dark
Those hands so red with sin
The past too painful

How could we have done these things?
To our fellow man?

No way to heal those cruel, deep scars
Stretched across backs
Cuts too deep with pain

Blood and guilt stain our history
Permanent and will never leave

How could we have done these things?
Reminds us of horrors committed

To brother, mother, fathers
To our fellow man.

—Amber Sbravati

Hope

When I'm feeling down and can't seem to find my way,
I find a quiet corner and just kneel down and pray.

I'll ask God to give me strength to make it through the day.
I know that deep within my heart he will show me the way.

Because I believe in Him and trust Him,
He will guide me through each day.
With each step that I make, He will pave the way.

So when I'm in doubt, and cannot seem to cope,
I just thank the All Mighty Creator for giving me His love,
and my hope.

—Marian Brown

Untitled

Man this poetry, driving me crazy
Pretty confident used to be
Now that I'm learning so many dimensions
This writing, not so sure
Exploratory essay, hard enough
Being poetic for my first time
Atop that, I must share
I hate completely
Not too good to share
Hard sharing the inside
Poetry sshmoetry
New feelings for writing, didn't know I had
Greatest poet ever, maybe a fraud
Evidence very convincing
No idea what to put down
Testing humility
Almost could quit
Never been clueless
Another thought of distaste
Reeling from the poet
Try try, seems impossible
Easy, just poetry

—Brian Hairston

Tears From the Heart

Broken heart
Tears I've cried,
Fall deep from within my eye,
Why do I feel like this inside?

Broken promises Sleepless nights, I want him back, But not to fight

I love him dearly
I miss him so
I want to hold him And never let go
I miss my goober
I hope he knows.

—Robyn Sartin

Upon Shadows

The bolden raven flies tonight
Upon shadows is where he lurks
This spiritual bird brings great fright
The bolden raven flies tonight
The abashed village runs from sight
Not wanting to be one whom irks
The bolden raven flies tonight
Upon shadows is where he lurks

—Steven Covington

America

The land of chaos and corruption
Living in sin and seduction
People mangled and contorted
Fatherless babies being aborted
Bars on the glass house where I stay
Parents fearful, children can't play
Pain paints faces all over neighborhood
Workin' three jobs government thinks is good
Forefathers cry though dead in soil
Never meant for the torment and toil
Take Jesus from class
Kids need medicine to pass
Jobless families roam the street
Huddling together looking for heat
Talk is cheap, gas is high
A tear to fall from the eye
Can't be remembered this way
People must change, make us okay
No one to stand and fight the battle
A lot of talkin' but really only rattle
Welcome to land of the free and home of the brave
I will try but alone cannot save...
America

—Steven Covington

When I See You

Sweaty palms
Rapidly beating heart
When I see you
Tongue tied
And stuttering
Incomprehensible words
When I see you
Teacher lecturing in vain
When I see you
Nothing else matters
When I see you
What's the capital city?
I could care less
When I see you

Palms sweating profusely
My heart's throbbing
I can't think
I can't speak
A coherent sentence
When I see you
Teacher's going on and on
Will she shut up?
Doesn't she know?
Nothing else matters
When I see you

—Brandon Grady

Wild Time

Blood red
Hot head

Blue eye
Bitch cry

Sour taste
Racing pace

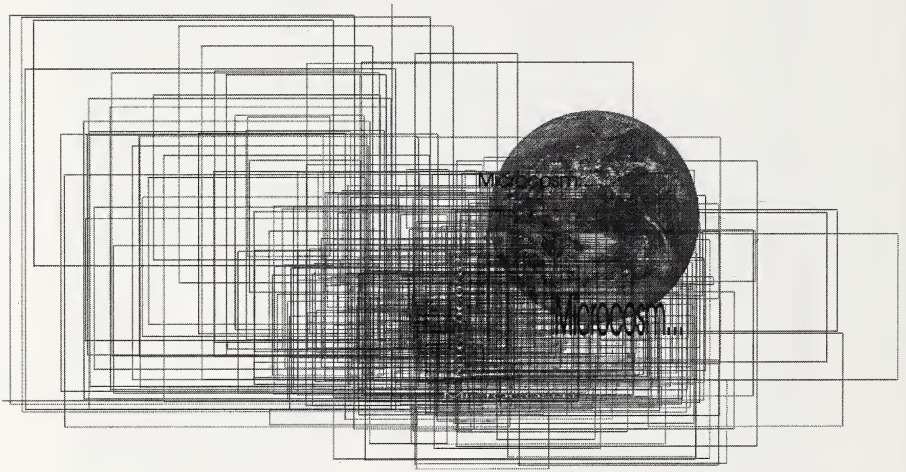
No heart
No face

Full night
Hold tight

—Amber Sbravati



Illustrator: Tabitha "Sketch" Turnage



Illustrator: Jerry Allen



